

Interview with  
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I was associated with the World War II Bracero Program, practically from the time it started until the time it was dismantled. I worked out of Bakersfield and was a general trouble-shooter and handy-man for that area. Among other things, it was my job to see that the men got medical care when they were sick; and we were fortunate in that there was already in existence the Agricultural Workers Health and Medical Association, set up by the Federal Security Agency to take care of domestic migratory workers. Here is the way it used to work with the braceros. We had large camps at both Shafter and Arden and in those camps we had clinics. The local doctors who were participating in the program would come into the clinics at regular hours and take care of the men from those main camps, and also from the smaller surrounding camps--these men were transported in for the purpose. However, as you know during the war all physicians were fantastically busy, and it got so they were no longer willing to take the time to drive out to the camps which were perhaps 15 miles outside Bakersfield. So, what we did was take the braceros into the doctors' offices in town, and the doctors would send their bills to the clinics where the administrative offices for the program were located. But, this did not work out too well either, because the doctors' offices were so crowded that the men would sometimes have to wait almost a whole day in the waiting room and naturally this made them none too happy. So, finally the system that we worked out was that the men would go into the Kern County General Hospital and receive care in the Out-patient clinic there.

We reimbursed the County on the basis of the volume of services that they provided for us. This seems to me to have made the most sense, since most of the complaints of the braceros were communicable diseases; and this, after all, was the County Health Department's concern anyway. ~~As far~~

As far as the braceros impressions of scientific medicine are concerned, and satisfaction with treatment by medical doctors. Well, I would say that in many cases they were none too happy. This being the very beginning of the program; we were getting the greenest sort of men--that is, men who had had a minimum of exposure to western civilization--let us say, and the doctors ~~were~~ ~~new~~ new experience for many of them. So, what we used to have in many cases was the men going into town on their own and patronizing chiropractors and people like that, who put on a good show with the ~~flu~~ fluorscope where the men could see their own skeletons; and this made a big impression. And the massaging of the backbone was something that the men could readily appreciate, and they thought that they were getting better care this way. We made it very clear to ~~the~~ all the men that unless they went to the doctors we had selected they would have to pay their own bills. But as I say this did not phase them in many cases. As far as I know there were no curanderos in the area. I am sure that if there had been, many of the men would have wanted to patronize them. I will also say, that a great many of the men treated themselves; using various kinds of ointments and herbs that they brought up with them, or were able to buy here, or maybe they picked them out in the fields, I don't know.

Now you ask about the "machismo" complex. I think that this has a definite bearing upon health. The emphasis that these men place upon the ~~virility~~ leads inevitably to a venereal disease problem, and let me give you a good example. It was well known that our camp near Delano had an unusually high gonorrhea rate. Well, in part obviously this could be attributed to the fact that Delano was a relatively wide open area. There were many houses of prostitution around there. But the matter was complicated by this business of "machismo". When we investigated our bracero camp near Delano we discovered that the "hero" of the camp--what a health educator today would call a "natural leader", was an old man. He claimed he was 49 years old, but I would be willing to bet my last nickel that he was actually almost ~~60~~ sixty. This old man enjoyed great fame in the camp, and also in the local whore houses because of his unusual ability--sexual ability. He was able to perform four or five or ~~six~~ times a night and keep this up night after night. Well, what we did was to crack down on the whore houses and we were very fortunate. We were able to get unusual co-operation from the sheriff's office, and the armed forces, and the military police, and so forth. I must say these people dragged their feet sometimes, but on this occasion, we raised such a 'stink' that we were able to get the lid put on for an unusually long time---four days!, until the operators of the houses were able to get more girls from San Diego.

You ask who administered the program during World War II. I believe that in 1942-43, the Farm Security Administration was responsible. In 1943-44, I believe the War Food Administration was in charge of the bracero program and this is the way it went. Every year or so the program would be transferred from one agency to another on the grounds that one or another agency was logically responsible and could

administer it with greater efficiency and so forth and so on. Of course it didn't work out any more efficiently. In fact, the result of all this was that we were all kept in a perennial state of agitation and uncertainty. Every year rumors would go around that the program was going to be shut down. So we would scurry around and try to line up some other job. And we would call in the braceros and we would say to them, "Well, boys, it looks as though ~~they~~ this is it. Better make it while the making's good." But the program dragged on until well after the war was over. I think they didn't get the last bracero out until December, 1947. The last agency to handle it, I believe, was the U. S. Department of Agriculture, and at that time the state agency most involved was the University of California's Agricultural Extension Service, they had what they called a Farm Labor Service during the war and they were responsible for example, for certifying the need for braceros throughout California. They may well have statistics and other historical materials of interest to you in their files.

You will hear a lot of people who claim that Braceros are making good money in this country; that they are returning home wealthy, and going into business for themselves in Mexico; and that this is the greatest thing that ever happened to the Mexican economy. Well, don't be taken in too much by this. I used to be shown letters by the men from their wives or their mothers in which they would complain that the local storekeepers had said to them, "All right, Señora Ramirez, your son Juan, is making so much money in the United States that I am going to have to charge you an extra 5 centavos for corn, and an extra 10 centavos for beans from now on." Then I would see letters like this, which would come let us say, from a man's cousin. "My mother, your aunt, your own mother's sister, is very sick and must

have an operation which will cost 500 pesos. My dear cousin, since you are making such good wages, we are sure that you will be able to etc. etc. etc." Now I would say to the fellows that showed me letters like this, "Don't be a sucker. Don't pay any attention, if it was your own mother maybe so, but this is just an aunt. You have no obligation here at all." Well, now I realize that I wasn't saying the right thing. I didn't know then what the extended family means in Mexico. So, in spite of my advice, I am certain that many of the men were sending back all their savings for family emergencies like this.

"Bracerismo" is, I would say, almost universally discussed in Mexico. Everybody has heard about it, everybody has some opinion about it. After all, practically every able-bodied male in the country has either been a bracero, or is thinking seriously of becoming one. The business is something of an issue in the elections down there. It will undoubtedly be an issue in the presidential election of 1958. The minority parties frequently criticize the administration, that is the PRI, for knuckling under to the United States, and for various sins alleged, or otherwise in the administration of the bracero program. Well, all this is so much 'sound and fury'! No elections are ever determined by the bracero program issue, for a simple reason that the PRI candidates never lose, whatever stand they may take on "bracerismo".

To some extent, however, the government is undoubtedly working on a policy that will be palatable. The government is not above criticism in the press, and when a member of the administration gets out of line he is subject to criticism by other members of the administration. Recently the Minister of Agriculture, at a cabinet meeting, said something like this, "The bracero system has not weakened our

economy in anyway. When the men go to the United States they either have a crop already started and they get back in time to harvest it, or they are on such poor land that they wouldn't have a crop anyway." Well, this Minister was jumped on by other members of the cabinet and the press had a field-day. In the official line, therefore, it would appear to be that Mexico actually is not as badly off as the swarm of braceros coming to the United States would appear to indicate. The official line would probably be that, 'all we need is a little time to work out our land distribution and then everybody would be happy to stay here in Mexico'.